

INTERVIEW WITH VENERABLE SAYALAY SUSILA

by Non-Duality Magazine, USA.

http://www.nondualitymagazine.org/nonduality_magazine.celibacyproject.page.htm

Sayalay Susilā was born in Pahang, Malaysia, in 1963 and ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun in the Burmese tradition at the age of 28, in Malaysia. Sayalay began developing her keen interest in insight meditation while at the University of Science Malaysia, where she obtained a degree in mass communications in 1988.

After graduation, Sayalay worked as a high school teacher for a year and a half. But disenchanted with worldly matters and desiring to be dedicated to the practice more than ever, she resigned her post to take up meditation full time. Six months after her ordination in 1991, she went to Panditarama Monastery in Myanmar, where she practiced intensively for nearly three years under the guidance of the famous meditation master Venerable U Pandita Sayadaw.

In 1994, wishing to cultivate concentration meditation, Sayalay moved to Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Myanmar. She placed herself under the guidance of renowned monk, Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw, and remained in the forest for 14 years. In addition to an assiduous program of meditation, she also learned the Abhidhamma, ancient discourses, and the Pāli language from Pak Auk Sayadaw. Meanwhile, she became his English-to-Chinese interpreter in Myanmar and abroad.

During her travels in Myanmar, she also practiced different meditation methods, such as those taught by Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, and Sayagyi U Ba Khin. As a result Sayalay has become an unusually accomplished teacher able to present the subtleties of the Buddha's teachings in a simple and direct way. In particular, she presents the most profound division of the teaching, the Abhidhamma, in a lucid manner grounded not in pedantic philosophy, but in actual meditation experience.

Sayalay has traveled extensively as a meditation and Dhamma teacher, presenting the Abhidhamma and Sutta expositions in formal lectures and talks, and has conducted meditation retreats throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia, Taiwan, Latvia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. She speaks fluent Chinese, English, Burmese, Hokkien, and Malay. Her publications include Unravelling the Mystery of Mind and Body through Abhidhamma (second edition), published in both English and Chinese, Mindfulness of Breathing (English), The Practical Manual of Abhidhamma (Chinese), and The Nine Virtues of the Buddha (Chinese).

INTERVIEW

NDM: How important is the practice of celibacy for jhana to arise?

Venerable Sayalay Susila: The meanings of jhana is to burn up the five hindrances of sense desires, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, and doubt. Indulging in sexual intercourse is the hindrance of sense desires. Without getting rid of this hindrance *during the practice of concentration*, the attainment of jhana is difficult. This is the reason why in Asia, when yogis come for concentration retreat, they are requested to observe eight precepts, including celibacy.

But this does not mean that one has to be celibate throughout one's lives if one wishes to attain jhana. Those who have attained jhana, later may not choose to practice celibacy.

NDM: How helpful is jhana in overcoming the fetters of sense desires?

Venerable Sayalay Susila: The Pali word Jhana has two meanings—1. To contemplate closely, 2. to burn up the five hindrances. When the mind is closely contemplating on the object, for example, the breath, sense desires cannot entice the mind. Only when the mind lets loose the object, the sense desires gain the power to obsess the mind. In this sense, jhana directly overcomes the hindrance of sense desires. We usually categorize sense desires (kamacchanda) under hindrances (nivarana).

When the five hindrances are burnt up through attainment of jhana, the mind becomes extremely clear, happy, calm and radiant. The Buddha said the happiness of third jhana surpasses all mundane happiness. The mind of the yogis will incline more to jhana happiness rather than sensual happiness which is full of faults.

With the help of concentration, wisdom is developed to see things as they really are as impermanence, suffering and non-self. With repeated seeing of these three characteristics, the desire for sense pleasure will be lessened.

When the wisdom is developed into the third path of enlightenment—non-returner, it permanently uproots the fetter of sensual lust (kamaraga). As a result, a non-returner will not return to this sensuous world.

In overcoming the fetter of sense desires, jhana temporarily suppresses it, but to completely uproot the fetters, we need the third noble path consciousness. This is to be achieved through insight meditation.

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NDM: Is it possible to attain third and fourth path enlightenment and not be celibate?

Venerable Sayalay Susila: It is possible not to be celibate and attain third path. But once a practitioner attains the third path enlightenment--non-returner, the path consciousness of non-returner cuts off the sensual lust permanently. Then this person no longer has desire to have sexual intercourse with anyone. Therefore this person will be celibate forever. Then he moves on to attain fourth path enlightenment. This also means it is not possible to attain fourth path enlightenment and not be celibate.

NDM: Just to be clear, if someone is indulging in sense pleasures, they can't be no more than second path, sakadagami, is this correct?

Venerable Sayalay Susila: CORRECT, SAKADAGAMI STILL HAS SENSUAL LUST, BUT NON-RETURNER HAS NO SENSUAL LUST.

NDM: Some Mahayana non dual Buddhist traditions (Nagarjuna, and his Madhyamaka, or "Middle Way," school of Buddhism) say that "samsara is nirvana" or that there is no difference between them. What is your traditional view on this sort of teaching?

Venerable Sayalay Susila: Theravada views samsara is suffering and nirvana is peace. Samsara and nirvana are completely different states. We practice to free ourself from suffering inherent in samsara—endless cycle of birth and death, and to attain nirvana—the deathless state. When there is birth, there is aging, sickness and death. Nirvana is free from birth and death.

However, it is always good to find out why Mahayana say samsara is nirvana. I believe there is a reason behind this saying.

NDM: What do you believe the reason is for this saying?

I guess, they take all the suffering inherent in samsara as an opportunity to practice compassion and wisdom until the Nibbana is attained. Therefore, to them samsara is Nibbana.

End of Interview